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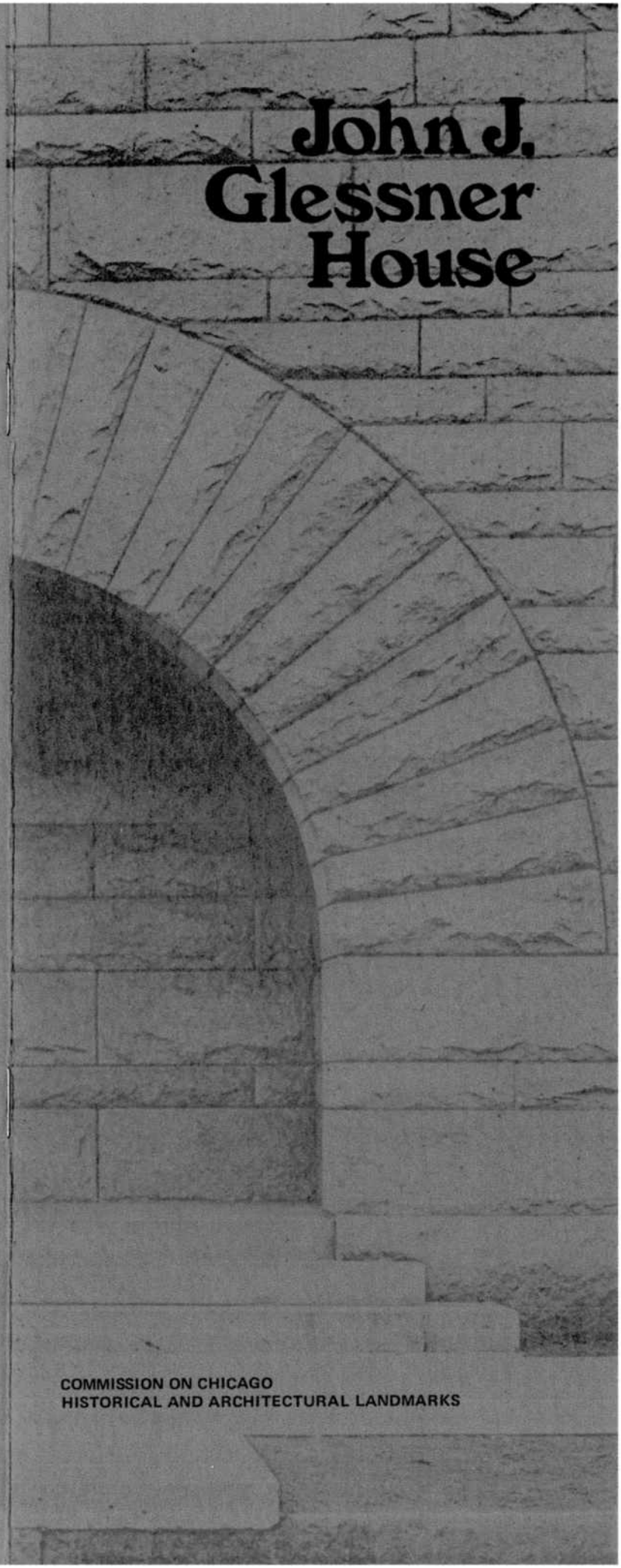
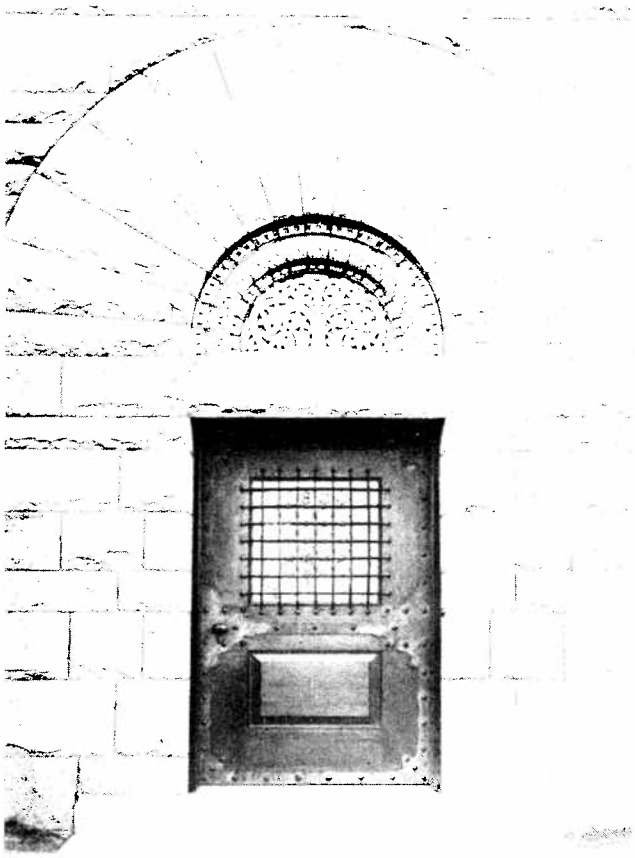
Details of the Eighteenth Street archway. (George Glessner, photographer; courtesy of the Chicago Architecture Foundation)

John J. Glessner House



COMMISSION ON CHICAGO
HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS



The entrance to Glessner House, 1800 South Prairie Avenue, photographed by George Glessner in the 1890s.
(Courtesy of the Chicago Architecture Foundation)

John J. Glessner House

1800 South Prairie Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

Henry Hobson Richardson, architect

1885-1887

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The John J. Glessner House was designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on October 14, 1970.

Commissioned in 1885 by John J. Glessner, a prominent Chicago business and cultural leader, Glessner House is significant in the development of early modern architecture. A mature design by architect Henry Hobson Richardson, the building is famous for its innovative floor plan and rugged Richardsonian facade. The house was built on Prairie Avenue when that Near South Side area was Chicago's most fashionable residential location. Today, with only a few houses left standing around it, Glessner House remains as a testament to an era long since passed.

Prairie Avenue at the height of its popularity, a tree-shaded promenade lined with the mansions of Chicago's most prominent citizens. Glessner House is first on the right.
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

The Glessners

John Jacob Glessner was born in Zanesville, Ohio in 1843. As a young man, he became a principal of Warder, Bushnell and Glessner, manufacturers of farm machinery. His business prospered, and in 1870 Glessner moved to Chicago to expand his company's Midwest operations. By 1902, the farm machinery industry had become fiercely competitive. To relieve the tension, Warder, Bushnell and Glessner merged with such leading firms as McCormick Reaper and Deering to form International Harvester Company. Because Glessner had brought his own company through the struggle and merger with such ability, the new organization named him one of its vice-presidents.

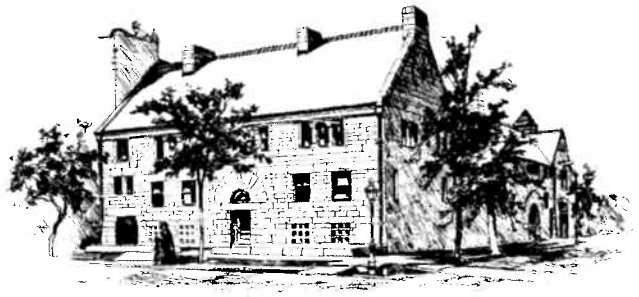
In the same year that he came to Chicago, John Glessner married Frances Macbeth of Springfield, Ohio. Prominent in Chicago society throughout their marriage, the couple figured actively in civic and artistic pursuits.

Among other positions, Mr. Glessner served extended terms as trustee of the Art Institute and the Chicago Orchestral Association, as director of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, and as president of the board of Rush Medical College. Mrs. Glessner was responsible for organizing the Monday Morning Reading Class, an association of cultivated Chicago women who met for over thirty years in the Glessner home.

Prior to building their famous Prairie Avenue residence, the Glessners occupied two other Chicago homes. Shortly after their marriage, they had rented a frame house on the Near West Side of the city; here their son George was born in 1871. In 1875, they purchased a brick home at Morgan and Washington streets, and it was here that their daughter Frances was born in 1878.

Seven years later, with two children and the desire and resources to join the many wealthy families moving to exclusive Prairie Avenue, Glessner purchased three lots at the southwest corner of Prairie and Eighteenth Street, and he set out to retain an architect to design his new home.

Glessner House



A line drawing of Glessner House from *Harper's Weekly*, June 23, 1888, accurately depicts the newly finished building.

After consultation with several East Coast architects, including McKim, Mead and White and Robert Henderson Robertson and William A. Potter, Glessner contacted Henry Hobson Richardson of Boston. Richardson came to Chicago in May of 1885 (to discuss the Marshall Field Wholesale Store) and surveyed Glessner's new property and visited the family home.

Richardson was of the opinion that windows of a city house were generally covered with layers of shades and curtains for privacy, so he asked Glessner if he had the courage to build a house with few openings on the street front. Glessner answered affirmatively; Richardson accepted the commission, and construction began in 1886. The family moved in on December 1, 1887.

Unfortunately, Richardson never saw the house on Prairie Avenue; he died a few weeks after completing the final drawings. However, his successor firm of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge executed the building true to the strength and honesty of design delineated by Richardson.

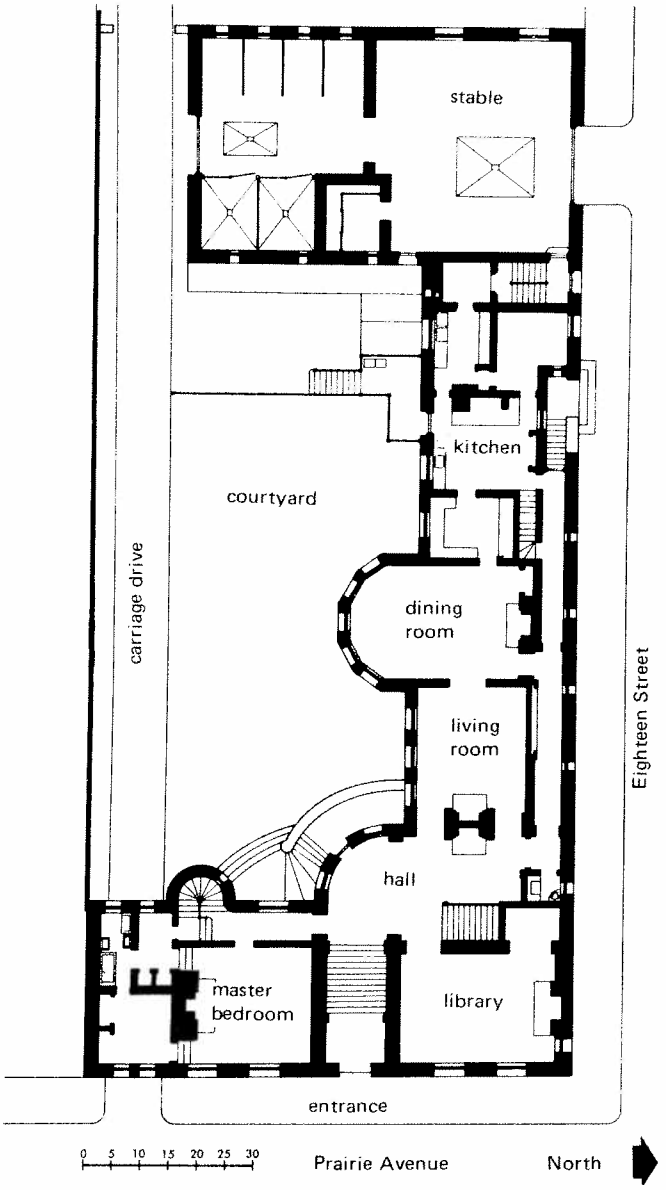
Richardson, as well as other architects of his time, saw themselves as heirs to a wide range of thought and expression. While built in Richardson's own distinctive style, the house borrows from Southern French Romanesque, Italian Renaissance, English Medieval, and American Colonial architecture.

Two stories high, with a full basement and attic, Glessner House is faced with heavily rusticated Braggville granite and topped by a red-tiled, steeply pitched gable roof. The building is characterized by rugged masonry with restrained carved ornament, a round arch motif, powerful window-wall relationships, and a simple geometric form. The stone is rock faced, laid in even horizontal courses, of varying heights, and battered at the base.

To allow the house to turn its focus away from the street, Richardson designed an ingenious, original plan that allowed many of the principal rooms to open on to a quiet interior courtyard. Bright and spacious, the court was landscaped, the walls faced with pinkish brick and trimmed at the lintels and sills with Lemont limestone. In contrast to the unrelieved surfaces that left the street elevations so severe, Richardson introduced three modified turrets that project into the outdoor space and correspond to the interior location of the dining room and conservatory above, major hallways on the first and second floors, and a spiral staircase.

Along Prairie Avenue stood mansions imitating traditional European design. Because Glessner House departed radically in both exterior treatment and internal plan, the building as well as its owners suffered harsh criticism from neighboring residents. While Glessner House was being built--rough textured, with few street-side windows, skirting the perimeter of the lot rather than squatting in the center--there was resentment against this "fortress" looming at the corner of Eighteenth Street.

What the neighbors did not know was that this house would help reform residential--indeed all--American architecture. With Richardson came the first departure from the accepted styles of design and detail. His practice provided an impetus that encouraged a pragmatic new approach which would grow to maturity in the work of the Chicago school. Flourishing in the 1880s and 1890s and continuing



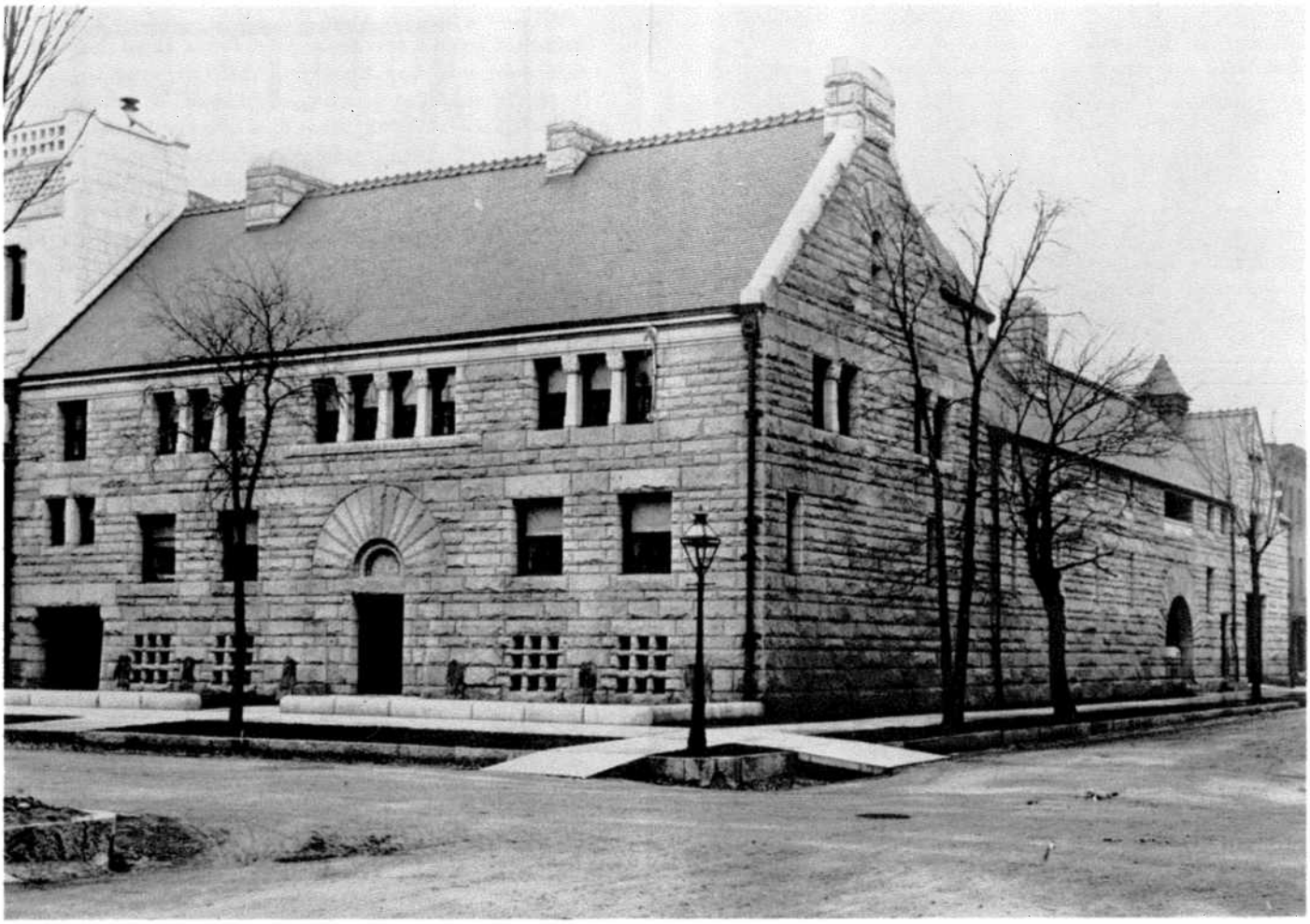
Richardson's innovative floor plan wraps the house around a large private courtyard.

The courtyard elevations, a medley of gentle curves and many windows, stand in sharp contrast to the hard-edged lines of the street facade, as seen in this 1923 photograph.
(Courtesy of the Chicago Architecture Foundation)

past the turn of the century, the Chicago school introduced the structural steel frame into commercial architecture, and was typified by the expression of design principles totally without reference to historical precedent.

A strong yet highly controlled work of architecture, Glessner House was one of Richardson's finest achievements; it was also a model that, along with his Marshall Field Wholesale Store, would soon influence such progressive architects as John Wellborn Root, Louis Henri Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Many historians consider the Glessner House to be Richardson's most successful residence, and the facade is best known for the spectacular arched entryway along Eighteenth Street. A Richardsonian trademark, this beautifully proportioned arch was, surprisingly enough, a side entrance used most often by the servants. A handful of narrow windows are placed on the long wall, just wide enough



Because the design emphasized severe simplicity and the street elevations lacked broad windows, the house was harshly criticized by neighbors. This photograph was taken by Glessner's son sometime during the 1890s.
(Courtesy of the Chicago Architecture Foundation)

to admit sufficient light to the corridors. An attached stable sits at the extreme west end of the property along Eighteenth; a cupola containing a pigeon house is situated on the roof where the stable joins the main building.

At the southern end of the Prairie Avenue frontage is the carriage entrance, or porte-cochere. The main entrance, at ground level, is situated at the perceived center of the Prairie Avenue elevation, a stone arch embedded above it. The door itself, paneled in oak with iron hardware, has a large square window set behind an ornamental iron grille. Because the basement rises partially above the ground plane, this door is actually below the first floor level, so the visitor faces a staircase immediately upon entering the house. There is yet another entrance off the courtyard, reached by a series of gently curving stone steps.

Inside, Glessner House is thoroughly unpretentious, restrained but warm, easily encouraging expression of the occupants' taste rather than imposing an aesthetic. A formal hall connects the Prairie Avenue and courtyard entries. South of this hallway is the master bedroom, often found on the second or third level of a house built during the late 1800s, but here the bedroom is located on the main floor, as in the owners' former home. To the north are the library and the main staircase to the second floor. Across the hall from the library is the formal parlor which opens into the dining room. The kitchen, pantries, and servants' dining room were at the west end of the house. Over the front door and adjacent to the library is a cork-lined alcove, specifically designed for the display of prints.

The second level was given over to an upper hall, bedrooms, and a conservatory. The children's rooms and the corner guest room ran along the Prairie Avenue side. Across the hall was a second, smaller guest bedroom which faced the courtyard and had a door to the conservatory. Servants' rooms were located above the kitchen; there were also coachman's quarters and a hayloft over the stable. A butler's room, a sewing room, and storage areas filled the attic. The basement originally housed a coal-fired boiler for a gravity-return steam heating system, and additional storage.

Because George suffered from severe hay fever, the children were educated at home. Richardson therefore designed a large schoolroom on the basement level. It is located beneath the master bedroom and entered from the stairs just inside the Prairie Avenue entrance, or from the basement, or from the spiral stairway in the tower at the south end of the house. This stairway also connected the family bedrooms

and the attic, and it is the only staircase that extends the full height of the house.

Because the Glessners entertained frequently and on a large scale, Richardson planned interior circulation with great care. All the major public rooms have at least two doorways, and this allows easy access to all first floor spaces so that they may comfortably accommodate a hundred or more guests. The Glessners appreciated the fact that sounds do not carry through the house because of the architect's specification to add an extra layer of wooden strips, before and after the first coat of mortar and plaster, between the floors and ceilings.

Floors of the principal rooms are maple. Quarter-sawed red oak panels the walls in the library, halls, and dining room, and as a three-foot-high wainscoting, oak lines the tower staircase and upstairs passages. Hugh oak beams support the ceiling in the main entry hall, while the library and dining room have iron beams concealed in oak. In the schoolroom the woodwork is long leaf yellow pine. Most bathrooms are white ceramic tile, but kitchen, service areas, and stable have white glazed brick, floor to ceiling.

Throughout the house there are ten fireplaces, some with elaborate painted tiles, some faced with marble. In addition to a fireplace, the schoolroom also has a huge brass radiating panel masking the coiled pipes for steam heat.

Richardson's firm designed some of the library and dining room furniture, with the large library desk fashioned after Richardson's own. Throughout his career, Richardson

The main hallway was a relaxed reception area which opened on to the formal living areas of the first floor and led, via the main staircase shown here, to the children's bedrooms and guest rooms located on the second floor.
(Courtesy of the Chicago Architecture Foundation)

This bookcase, photographed in 1923 in the upper hall, was designed by Glessner family friend, Isaac Scott, in 1875. An excellent example of modern Gothic furniture, it shows strong Eastlake influence.
(Courtesy of the Chicago Architecture Foundation)

was very much interested in interior design and furnishings as part of a total architectural concept, and in his later years he was an influential member of the Arts and Crafts movement in America. This movement, which originated in Britain during the 1860s, sought the return of the craftsman to the production of furnishings and utensils. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the machine had replaced hand craftsmanship, and although many products could be rapidly and inexpensively mass-produced, their design reflected the standards of economy and profit rather than those of beauty of materials, fine workmanship, pleasing design, or fitness for use. The Arts and Crafts movement wanted, if not to eradicate the machine, to bring back the dominance of the craftsman to applied and decorative arts.

The Glessners were enthusiastic toward the Arts and Crafts movement. A good deal of the family's furniture had been designed by Isaac Scott, an American designer of the movement. The piano in the Glessner House parlor has works made by Steinway and a case beautifully designed by Francis H. Bacon, who was chief designer for A. H. Davenport and Company of Boston, supplier of many Glessner pieces. Designs by William Morris, leader of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, were purchased for window, floor and wall coverings. Sculpture, paintings, etchings, engravings, rare books, and vases--including items by Arts and Crafts practitioners-- crowded the rooms.

By the time construction crews left the site in December of 1887, the combined cost of land and house totaled $159,000. And that did not include all that was invested in the furnishings and art that filled roughly 19,000 square feet of space.

Glessner House Over The Years

For almost half a century, the Glessners lived comfortably and gracefully in their simple Richardson masterpiece. Both George and Frances were married here. Their parents both died here: Mrs. Glessner in 1932, Mr. Glessner in 1936.

During the early years of the twentieth century, as Prairie Avenue residents began moving north to the Gold Coast along Lake Shore Drive, the neighborhood they left behind declined considerably. A few of the mansions were converted to high-class boarding homes. Many more were torn down and replaced by light industrial buildings or parking lots.

Wary of what might befall his home, Glessner deeded it in 1924 to the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects with the understanding that they would take possession of the house after he and Mrs. Glessner died, maintaining and operating the building as a library, museum, and educational center. After Glessner's death, the American Institute of Architects, unable to meet the high maintenance costs, transferred the deed back to the Glessner heirs.

About a year and a half later, the family gave the property to Armour Institute of Technology (which later expanded to become Illinois Institute of Technology). While in the institute's possession, the house was converted in 1946 to a research center, with architects Friedman, Alschuler and Sincere taking great pains to leave the original floor plan unaltered. Later, in 1958, Illinois Institute of Technology sold the property to a graphic arts foundation. They in turn remained in the house until moving their headquarters to Pittsburgh in 1966, at which time they put the house up for sale. By that time, Glessner House was the only one of Richardson's Chicago buildings still standing. The other three--American Merchants' Union Express Company building (1872-3), Marshall Field Wholesale Store (1885-7), and Franklin MacVeagh House (1885-7)--had all been demolished.

The corner guest bedroom, in an 1888 photograph taken by George Glessner, typifies the decorative style used throughout the house. (Courtesy of the Chicago Architecture Foundation)

Although some Chicagoans realized the significance of this house, apparently no real effort was made to insure its safety. Then Philip Johnson, a New York architect, offered to buy the house and turn it over to any organization that would restore and maintain it. Still there was no response, although several universities and foundations were contacted.

Finally, several young men from various professional backgrounds, greatly disturbed that no one had stepped forward to secure the building from an uncertain fate, raised the money necessary to obtain a right of first refusal. To do so, they incorporated as the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation. Because this Foundation existed as a not-for-profit educational and preservation organization, the graphic arts group, respecting the house as did the fledgling Foundation, was persuaded to let the Chicago group buy the house for $35,000--one half of the asking price.

An intensive fund-raising drive followed, and Glessner House was purchased in November, 1966. The Foundation's first undertaking was to restore the principal rooms and plan sympathetic, adaptive reuse of others. The library, master bedroom, schoolroom, and kitchen suite have been restored; parlor and dining room await final touches. This work is continuing as funds are raised. Some of the original furniture has been donated by the Glessner heirs and is on display. Second- and third-floor space is primarily devoted to offices for various architectural organizations, including the headquarters of the Foundation itself, which shortened its name in autumn of 1977 to Chicago Architecture Foundation. The house is open to the public on a regular schedule for tours and to Foundation members for special events.

Beginning as early as 1870 and lasting through the first years of the 1900s, Prairie Avenue was the center of the most elite residential enclave in Chicago. The avenue boasted the most exclusive members of the city's social, civic, and business register, with the Fields, Armours, Palmers, Searses, Pullmans, Kelloggs, Kimballs, Keiths, and Colemans but a few of the prominent families who lived here.

The library has been restored to look as it did when the Glessners lived in the house. Many of the objects are original family possessions, generously given to the Chicago Architecture Foundation by the Glessner grandchildren.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

Up one side of the quiet, tree-shaded avenue and down the other, they erected elaborate mansions, sparing no expense inside or out. Their dwellings were commissioned to some of the nation's foremost architects: Henry Hobson Richardson, John Wellborn Root, Solon Spencer Beman, Richard Morris Hunt. Once completed, the homes were filled with fine furniture, imported marbles, and art works of great value, attesting to the affluence of the owners. The life-style of Prairie Avenue was no less than grand, and the development of the area was a significant step in the young city's march to maturity.

Today, only five houses remain around the once lavish and sought-after stretch of Prairie between Eighteenth and Twentieth streets. Yet these houses represent an excellent cross-section of American residential architecture at the end of the nineteenth century.

Glessner House is Richardson's magnificent tribute to a broadly interpreted Romanesque. The William W. Kimball House (1891-2, designed by Beman), patterned after the Chateau de Josselin in France, illustrates nineteenth-century America's attempt at duplicating the opulence of Europe. The Coleman-Ames House (designed in 1886 by Henry Ives Cobb and Charles Sumner Frost) is an adaptation of Richardsonian Romanesque. The Elbridge G. Keith House (1871), although the earliest and least pretentious of the homes still standing, nevertheless reflects the gentility and dignity of Prairie Avenue's past. The Marshall Field, Jr. House (begun in 1882) rambles with myriad additions, conceived by several fine architects, attesting to the changing needs of the various owners over the years.

In 1974, the City of Chicago and the Chicago Architecture Foundation began planning the Prairie Avenue Historic District, which was designated a Chicago Landmark on December 27, 1979. The intent of the district is twofold: to safeguard and refurbish what remains of the original neighborhood, and to chronicle and interpret the urban changes that have occurred here. Empty lots on Prairie Avenue are now graced with large, all-weather, individual plaques describing the houses that used to stand there and the families that once called them home.

Years ago, Mr. Glessner stated in his will that he hoped his home could be used as a learning center and that the family's cherished portrait of Richardson would hang in the house for as long as it was standing. Now that visitors to Glessner House can experience Richardson's masterpiece, with the portrait hanging in the hall for all to see, the wishes of Mr. Glessner have indeed been fulfilled.

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepares detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.